

The Extreme Right and Roma and Sinti in Europe: A New Phase in the Use of Hate Speech and Violence?

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SHORTLY after the fall of Communism, Roma and Sinti faced troubling times in Europe. The transition towards democracy and a market economy that was welcomed by most and beneficial to many was accompanied by a rise in both ethnic consciousness and nationalist tendencies. In some post-communist countries, Roma and Sinti were victims of both the difficult transition to a market economy as the first to lose their livelihoods and of nationalist agendas that often singled them out

as scapegoats.² In the early 1990s, Roma and Sinti were the targets of a number of attacks such as the mob violence in the Romanian village of Hadareni that left three Romani men dead and led to the destruction of the homes and property of many others.³ Such outbursts of violence against Roma, coupled with their dire socio-economic conditions, have created a strong impetus to migrate westward. But many Roma and Sinti who sought asylum in the West met with similar threats there and violence against them brought even more deaths.⁴

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² The OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities made this observation in his report from 1993: "This alienation from the processes of governance also has clear ramifications in the area of legal protection against anti-Roma discrimination and attacks, which can only be countered if effective remedies are available through the legal-judicial systems. The rule of law is all the more urgent in the recent context of collective 'scapegoating' of Roma for societal ills through anti-Roma discrimination and the persistent practice of 'popular justice' by skinheads, by organized vigilantes, and in some cases, even by members of government security forces." OSCE, "Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE Region: Report of the High Commissioner on National Minorities", CSCE Communication No. 240, Prague, 14 September 1993, http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/1993/09/3473_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

³ On 20 September 1993, Mr Aurel Pardalian Lacatus, Mr Rupa Lupian Lacatus and Mr Mircea Zoltan, three Romani men, were killed by a mob in the village of Hadareni. The lynching occurred after an ethnic Romanian had been stabbed to death by one of the Romani men during a conflict earlier that day. The men attempted to seek refuge in a neighbour's house but were eventually found by the mob. The villagers demanded they come out and then set fire to the house. Mr Aurel Pardalian Lacatus and Mr Rupa Lucian Lacatus tried to escape but were caught and beaten to death. Mr Mircea Zoltan remained in the house where he died as a result of the fire. After the murders, a mob of ethnic Romanian and Hungarian villagers proceeded to set fire to other Romani homes and property in Hadareni. In total, 14 Romani homes were scorched and another five were demolished. Additional Romani property such as cars, stables and other possessions were also destroyed that evening and the following day. Further information on the case can be found at: <http://www.errc.org/db/00/18/m00000018.pdf> (accessed: 20 July 2009). House Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights Abuses of the Roma (Gypsies), 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., April 1994, http://www.archive.org/stream/humanrightsabuse1994unit/humanrightsabuse1994unit_djvu.txt (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁴ Project on Ethnic Relations (PER), "Prevention of Violence and Discrimination against the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe", Report of a conference held in Bucharest, Romania, 1997; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), General Policy Recommendation No. 3 on Combating racism and intolerance against Roma/Gypsies, 6 March 1998, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/GPR/EN/Recommendation_N3/Rec03en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009); OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, "Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area", 10 March 2000, http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/2000/03/241_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

Fifteen years later the situation might seem very similar, but it is not. In many respects it is different and, in fact, more dangerous. In the early 1990s there was mainly impromptu community violence against Roma and Sinti in Europe. The nature of the transition period contributed to this as democratic institutions and the rule of law had yet to take root in countries that had only just rid themselves of Communism. What we are witnessing today is the deliberate and organised use of hate speech and incitement of violence against Roma and Sinti in a number of countries. It is easy to identify those behind it as anti-Romani hate speech is openly promoted by them, i.e. far-right political parties or extreme organisations or movements.⁵

Based on non-governmental sources⁶ and media reporting, an increase can be observed

in violence and hate-motivated incidents targeting members of Roma and Sinti communities in several countries in the OSCE region.⁷ Arson attacks on Romani houses, physical assaults, racist slurs, property destruction and police violence are the dominant types of crimes reported. Among the reported incidents, some have resulted in death. Attackers often targeted whole families in their homes (Hungary, Czech Republic) or whole communities in isolated settlements (Italy, Czech Republic). There are those who think that violent acts targeting Roma and Sinti can also be traced to some of these parties and groups, although concrete evidence has been difficult to obtain in cases of murder. The police and courts, which are usually slow or resistant to recognising the racial basis for the attacks, often compound the problem.⁸

⁵ *Such groups include the Ataka party in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian National Union, the New Right party in Romania, the Slovak National Party in Slovakia, the Jobbik party in Hungary and its associated Hungarian Guard, the Northern League party in Italy and the Workers' Party in the Czech Republic, to name just a few.*

⁶ *The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) regularly reported on anti-Romani crimes in incident reports and parallel reports to UN treaty monitoring bodies. Human Rights First devoted a specific section to violence against Roma and Sinti in its 2008 Hate Crime Survey and provided individual country overviews of eleven countries. Romani CRISS in Romania and Minority Rights Centre in Serbia reported on anti-Romani crimes committed nationwide. Several NGOs issued reports on incidents in Italy. Most NGOs reporting on anti-Romani crimes collect their data through victim reports and media monitoring, and some do independent field research. In its clearing-house role, ODIHR's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI) has also collected information and articles on hate-motivated violence against Roma, many of which were provided by news agencies and NGO newsletters.*

⁷ *In 2008, in connection with its review of Germany, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern about the increase of reported racism-related incidents against members of Roma and Sinti communities. See: UN CERD, Concluding Observations, Germany, 22 September 2008, Geneva, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/441/50/PDF/G0844150.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

CERD was also gravely concerned about the "alarming increase" in the incidence and severity of racially motivated violence against Roma in Russia, among others, especially violence by young persons belonging to extremist groups. See: UN CERD, Concluding Observations, Russian Federation, 22 September 2008, Geneva, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/441/78/PDF/G0844178.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

In Italy, where no official statistics on violent hate crimes are regularly made available, media and non-governmental organisations highlighted a spike of anti-Romani and anti-immigrant violence in 2007 and 2008. See: Human Rights First, "2008 Hate Crime Survey: Violence Against Roma and Sinti", <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/reports.aspx?s=roma-and-sinti&p=index> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

Based on information collected by ODIHR/CPRSI, news media in Hungary reported on 19 violent incidents against Romani persons and destruction of property in 2008.

See: ECRI, ECRI Report on Slovakia (fourth monitoring cycle), 26 May 2009, <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Slovakia/SVK-CbC-IV-2009-020-ENG.pdf> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁸ *Hungary can serve as the latest example. Despite all efforts taken by Hungarian law enforcement authorities to identify the perpetrators of the more than two dozen attacks on Roma over the last year and a half, the perpetrators were only identified in a handful of cases. Only in one case did the court establish that the physical assault was carried out on a Romani person on account of her ethnic origin.*

Official data from the monitoring of hate crimes committed against Roma and Sinti by OSCE Participating States remains very limited. In their submissions to ODIHR, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland identified crimes committed against Roma as notable examples of hate crimes in their country.⁹ The response from the Czech Republic even identified Roma as the group most vulnerable to hate crimes.¹⁰ But only nine Participating States reported collecting data on hate crimes against Roma or Sinti (Croatia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland).¹¹ None of these States, however, submitted statistics on hate crimes against Roma and Sinti in 2008. Monitoring and reporting of hate crimes committed against this community relied on various sources. The tendency on the part of Roma and Sinti victims to not report hate-motivated crimes at all, due to an inherent distrust in the authorities must also be overcome. The real extent of the problem, therefore, cannot be measured properly even in those countries where data on anti-Romani hate crimes are collected.¹²

What characterises the groups behind these hate crimes? Our hypothesis is that in the present circumstances those forces deliberately use hate speech and, eventually, incitement to violence as tools to gain political power and legitimatise themselves in mainstream politics. While this approach has so far met with only limited success, anti-Romani elements were part of the platforms that

helped a number of political parties gain seats in the June's elections to the European Parliament.¹³

These groups revive demons from the past, like fascist symbols and language. They play on people's insecurities in hard times and manipulate their feelings by channelling their grievances against easy recognisable targets like Jews or "Gypsies." They are more visible today than in the past as they have learned that anti-Romani rhetoric can pay off politically and attract votes. These groups and parties are dangerous because their strategy is to mobilise the segments of society that may not be willing to openly voice these ideas but agree with them all the same. The results of the European Parliament elections demonstrate that parties can use anti-Romani rhetoric to gain greater representation, a fact that could play an important role in upcoming elections, national or local, and potentially pose a danger to social cohesion and stability.

There is no direct evidence of a correlation between the current economic crisis and the incidence of hate crimes. Eurostat, the European Union's statistical body, recently released data on the economies of the 27 Member States that illustrates this point well: GDP across the EU fell by 4.5 percent year-on-year in the first quarter, and countries of the Baltic States have seen an even more dramatic fall.¹⁴ Despite the real economic difficulties faced by many of these countries, in only a few have we seen a rise in violence against

⁹ *Response to the OSCE/ODIHR questionnaire on hate crimes. Unpublished data provided to author.*

¹⁰ *Response to the OSCE/ODIHR questionnaire on hate crimes. Unpublished data provided to author.*

¹¹ *Response to the OSCE/ODIHR questionnaire on hate crimes. Unpublished data provided to author.*

¹² *See: Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)'s 2009 European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU MIDIS), which noted that members of the Romani community had little confidence in the police, went to the police less often to have a crime investigated or to report a crisis situation and rarely lodged complaints. FRA, "Data in Focus: The Roma", EU MIDIS: European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, 2009, http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/EU-MIDIS_ROMA_EN.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009). See also: ECRI, , ECRI Report on Hungary (fourth monitoring cycle), 24 February 2009, <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Hungary/HUN-CbC-IV-2009-003-ENG.pdf> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

¹³ *Fighting against "Gypsy criminality" was one of the main identifying concepts of the Hungarian party Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary), which gained a growing number of sympathisers over the last two years. The party won three seats in the 2009 European Parliament elections and with the same level of support they will be able to enter the Hungarian Parliament next year.*

¹⁴ *Eurostat data, quoted in Gazeta Wyborcza, 4 June 2009, 26.*

Roma and Sinti. There must, therefore, be other factors behind what we are witnessing.

The first key factor is the deteriorating social and economic situation of Roma and Sinti. This feeds anti-Romani prejudice and stereotypes that are easily exploited by the groups and parties already mentioned. Second, political discourse has been deteriorating as more populist, racist or extreme views are allowed to circulate without raising an outcry or condemnation by public figures.¹⁵

Finally, there is often a spark that ignites the fire; the rise in hate speech and violence against Roma and Sinti in Italy and Hungary can be traced back to concrete incidents provoked by Roma themselves.¹⁶ But the situation on the ground was already highly combustible. If the deteriorating social and economic situation of Roma and Sinti is one of the factors behind the rise in hostility, hate speech and violence with which they are targeted, how has this happened? What has been done – or not done – to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti since the early 90s?

ODIHR's recent status report, released in September 2008, on the implementation of the *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*, provides a stark answer to this question.¹⁷ The general conclusion from our assessment is that there has been little tangible progress in most areas of concern; there is no sign of a positive breakthrough in any of the areas and the movement in some areas has actually been backwards.

Significant gaps remain between Romani communities and mainstream society in areas such as housing, education, employment and access to public services and justice. There is a lack of proactive approaches by governments at the national, regional and local levels, as well as a lack of measures to ensure the sustainability of policies by providing adequate financial, institutional and human resources. Although there are some positive recommendations and good practices being piloted at the local level, these have not been translated into country-wide practices.

Government-run, Roma-related programmes do not prioritise or focus enough on strategic areas that can ensure sustainable change, such as access to quality education at all levels. Significant challenges still remain for ensuring stronger participation and involvement of Roma and Sinti, both electorally and in civil society, in policy design and implementation.

The status report outlines disturbing trends with regard to racism and intolerance against Roma and Sinti, including against Roma and Sinti migrants. They face police violence, forced evictions and ghettoisation and a growing dependency on social welfare. Roma and Sinti issues continue to figure only marginally on the political agenda of governments and often only when tensions threaten to escalate into violence. The clear conclusion is that neglect is no longer an option. States have to demonstrate real political will and take vigorous action to close the gap between the majority and this minority.

¹⁵ *In Italy, for example, inflammatory media reports and political extremists spoke openly of the desire to expel Roma from their communities, which contributed to a climate in which physical attacks occurred against Roma. See: UN CERD, Concluding Observations, Italy, 16 May 2008, Geneva, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/419/12/PDF/G0841912.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed: 20 July 2009); and ERRC, Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *osservAzione and Sucar Drom, "Parallel Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for its review of Italy", January 2008, <http://www.errc.org/db/02/C8/m000002C8.pdf> (accessed: 20 July 2009). See also: OSCE/ODIHR and HCNM, "Assessment of the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti in Italy", February 2009, http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2009/03/36620_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).**

¹⁶ *Following the October 2006 murder in Olaszliszka, Hungary, which involved the fatal beating of an ethnic Hungarian teacher by a group of Roma, crimes associated with Roma individuals received increased media attention. The conflict is deepened by the repeated demonstrations of power by the Hungarian Guard and the National Defense Movement (Nemzeti Örsereg).*

¹⁷ *OSCE/ODIHR, "Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area: Status Report 2008", September 2008, www.osce.org/odihr/item_11_33130.html (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

Otherwise, the preconditions will remain, thus preserving – or even escalating – the tensions and violence against Roma and Sinti.¹⁸

In the short term, it is essential for officials and opinion makers to mobilise and to condemn publicly the ideologies and activities of extremist parties and movements. The EU should play an important role in this process, by providing leadership in challenging any developments that endanger minorities or threaten social cohesion and stability. Another recommendation is for national courts to make better and more effective use of European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence related to hate crimes and racist violence. Over the long term, governments should enhance their efforts and increase budgetary allocations for the implementation of Roma-related policies, ensuring that an impact is made at the local level.

Promoting the development and perpetuation of a political climate based on democracy and rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities should be a priority for all governments. Competent authorities should make full use of legal measures to prevent the emergence of and outlaw those political parties and movements whose statuses and/or activities are breaching law and conflicting with constitutions.

Activities of ODIHR's Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues

Combating racism and discrimination is central to what the Contact Point does, and this is an element of many of the provisions of the *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*.¹⁹ The Contact Point has paid constant attention to the issue of racist violence, hate crimes against Roma, tensions and crisis situations. To assess such incidents and the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti first-hand, the Contact Point has undertaken fact-finding visits to Romania (2007),²⁰ Italy (2008)²¹ and Hungary (June 2009).²² The situation of Roma in the Czech Republic is also of concern following anti-Romani protests by extremist groups in the town of Litvinov.

The Contact Point also supports OSCE Participating States in implementing OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 6 (2008) on *Enhancing Efforts to Implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*, with a special emphasis on early education.²³

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR, "Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area", *Status Report, September 2008, 9-11*, www.osce.org/odihr/item_11_33130.html (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁹ OSCE Ministerial Council, "Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area", *Decision No. 3/03, December 2003*, www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2003/11/1751_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

²⁰ See: OSCE/ODIHR, "Field Visit on Police and Roma relations, Romania", November 2007, www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/02/29832_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

²¹ See: OSCE/ODIHR and HCNM, "Assessment of the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti in Italy", *Report of a fact-finding to Milan, Naples and Rome, July 2008*, www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2009/03/36620_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).

²² Field assessment conducted between 25 June and 3 July 2009. Report forthcoming.

²³ OSCE Ministerial Council, "Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the action plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area", *Decision No. 6/08, December 2008*, www.osce.org/documents/mcs/2008/12/35585_en.pdf (accessed: 20 July 2009).